Symbolic–Doctrinal Transformation in Islam : Reframing Religious Formation between Persia and Southeast Asia.

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Abstract.

This article develops the **Symbolic–Doctrinal Transformation Theory** to explain how Islamic doctrines emerge from the sedimentation of symbolic practices within specific socio-historical contexts. Moving beyond normative historiography, the study employs a comparative-historical approach to analyze the transformation of Persian dualistic symbolic structures rooted in Zoroastrianism into Shi'i imamology, and contrasts this with the persistence of symbolic Islam in Indonesia. Drawing on contemporary debates in sociology of religion and anthropology, the paper argues that Islamic diversity is structurally produced through different trajectories of symbolic and doctrinal transformation. The findings contribute to broader discussions on religious authority, identity formation, and the sociology of Islam in global contexts.

Keywords: symbolic transformation, doctrine, Islam, Shi'ism, Indonesia, Iran, religious authority

1. Introduction.

Recent developments in the study of religion have shifted attention from doctrinal systems to lived practices, ritual, and embodiment. Scholars such as Talal Asad have emphasized that religion must be understood as a historically constructed discursive tradition, rather than a fixed theological entity. Yet, a theoretical gap remains: how do symbolic practices become doctrinal authority?

Building on earlier observations by Kenneth W. Morgan, this article proposes that Islam should be analyzed as a dynamic process shaped by symbolic mediation and historical contingencies. The central argument is that doctrinal systems emerge through what this study terms **"symbolic sedimentation".**

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Positioning.

Contemporary scholarship on Islam and religion can be grouped into several strands:

First, **discursive tradition theory** (Talal Asad), which situates Islam within power-laden historical practices.
Second, **lived religion approaches** (e.g., Robert Orsi), emphasizing everyday religious experience.
Third, **symbolic anthropology**, represented by Clifford Geertz.
Fourth, classical sociology, including Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

More recent works (2015–2025) highlight:

- religious materiality and embodiment
- ritual as knowledge production
- postcolonial critiques of Islamic historiography

However, none provide a unified explanation of how symbolic practices evolve into doctrinal systems. This article fills that gap.

3. Methodology.

This study adopts a "**comparative-historical sociology approach"**, combining:

- **Genealogical analysis** (tracing conceptual transformations)
- **Symbolic analysis** (rituals, narratives, memory)
- **Institutional analysis** (authority structures)

Case Selection.

- Persia / Iran → high doctrinal consolidation
- Indonesia → high symbolic persistence

Data Sources.

- classical texts (historical chronicles)
- secondary scholarly literature
- ethnographic interpretations

Limitations.

- absence of primary fieldwork data
- reliance on interpretative synthesis
- potential overgeneralization in comparative framing

4. Theoretical Model: Symbolic Sedimentation.

The theory proposes a three-stage model:

Stage 1: Symbolic Formation.

Religion emerges through:

- ritual practices
- narrative constructions
- collective memory

Stage 2: Symbolic Intensification.

Symbols become emotionally and socially central, especially during crises.

Stage 3: Doctrinal Consolidation.

Symbols crystallize into:

- formal theology
- institutional authority
- normative systems

This process is contingent, not deterministic.

5. Persian Case: Dualism and Imamological Consolidation.

Pre-Islamic Persia, influenced by Zoroastrianism, structured reality through moral dualism. This symbolic framework persisted after Islamization.

The Pertempuran Karbala marked a critical turning point. The martyrdom of Husain bin Ali transformed historical conflict into moral symbolism.

Through symbolic sedimentation:

- narrative → doctrine
- memory → theology
- symbol → institution

This culminated in the Safavid state under Ismail I, where Shi‘ism became state doctrine.

6. Indonesian Case: Symbolic Continuity.

Islam in Indonesia developed through trade networks and cultural interaction, not political conflict. As a result:

- ☐ symbolic practices remained dominant
- ☐ doctrinal authority remained diffuse
- ☐ religious identity remained plural

Rituals such as Asyura commemorations illustrate symbolic persistence without doctrinal centralization.

7. Comparative Discussion

The comparison reveals:

Aspect	**Iran**	**Indonesia**
Historical Trigger	Political conflict	Cultural diffusion
Symbolic Role	Transitional	Persistent
Doctrine	Centralized	Distributed
Authority	Imamological	Communal

8. Implications for Global Religious Studies.

This theory contributes to global scholarship by:

1. Bridging symbolic anthropology and doctrinal analysis
2. Offering a non-essentialist view of Islam
3. Providing a transferable model for other religions

It suggests that:
religious diversity is structurally generated, not deviant

9. Conclusion.
The **Symbolic–Doctrinal Transformation Theory** demonstrates that:
Islam evolves through dynamic interactions between symbol, doctrine, and history. The divergence between Iran and Indonesia reflects not theological difference, but distinct trajectories of transformation.

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